



# The California Master Plan for Education

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## Dual Language Fluency

Frequently asked questions and answers

**Q. Why is it important for children to learn a second language?**

A. California's public education system should equip all students with the knowledge and skills to be able to successfully transition to work, postsecondary education, and active participation in society. Increasingly, the society to which students will transition, as well as many of the careers they will pursue, is global in nature. Students with fluency in multiple languages will be most competitive for careers that do business with other nations. In addition, California businesses and institutions increasingly need a multi-lingual workforce to interact with the increasing diversity within our own borders. Research indicates that understanding and respect for different cultures is enhanced by learning the language of that culture – a set of outcomes that are critical to maintaining a cohesive society as diverse as California's.

**Q. How would this affect California's current bilingual teaching program?**

A. There would be no direct impact on existing bilingual programs because of efforts to develop multiple language fluency in all students. The Master Plan does not prescribe how schools should help students acquire fluency in a second language. It permits multiple approaches to accomplish this goal.

**Q. Given the budget cuts, can California afford to teach public school students to speak two languages? Won't we need additional textbooks, expensive teacher training programs, and other items?**

A. It is important to keep in mind that the Master Plan for Education provides a vision and set of goals to be pursued over the next 20 years. It is not expected that all of its goals will be pursued immediately, especially those that will require new investments. There is a growing body of research that supports teaching a second language to young children when their brains are most receptive to learning. Moreover, virtually every other country in the world routinely expects their teachers to teach, and their students to learn, a second language. The cost need not be prohibitive if fully integrated into the curriculum. However, it will be necessary to prepare larger numbers of teachers who are also proficient in a second language.

**Q. Might our society become fractured if we promote multiple languages in schools?**

A. No. It is far more likely that our society will become less fractured as more of its citizens become fluent in a second language and grow in their understanding and appreciation of other cultures. The greatest difficulty will be how best to address the multiple languages that students already possess when enrolling in public schools.

**Q. The Master Plan calls for every student to master a second language by high school graduation. How would second language literacy/fluency be implemented? Would it be tested in the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE)? How much would it cost?**

**A.** There are still many details to be worked out that will determine the most effective and efficient ways of achieving this goal. California's growth and economic vitality are strongly linked to interaction with countries around the world. The many children enrolled in public schools who speak a language other than English represent an asset that should be nurtured. Students who speak only English should be assisted early in developing an interest and literacy in a second language.

Which languages should be supported and taught, identifying reliable sources of language instructors, and criteria for certifying fluency/literacy are examples of issues that await public discussion. The Master Plan acknowledges that many of these details are best informed by representatives of California's instructional workforce. At the same time, second language fluency should be a candidate for inclusion in the state's academic content standards. The vast diversity of languages that could be learned by students precludes measurement of foreign language competency in the high school exit exam. Costs cannot be reliably estimated until answers to issues such as those above are obtained.

**Q. Isn't your recommendation for dual language literacy little more than a thinly veiled attempt to revive affirmative action?**

**A.** No. In fact, it is an acknowledgment of two very important facts: Many students enter school with limited literacy in two languages and minds disposed to learning both equally well; and virtually all other countries have accepted the importance of literacy in a second language, often English, in international affairs. The fact that English is the primary language of California does not absolve the state of its responsibility to prepare its people for participation in a global society. While second language fluency will result in most students partially meeting one of the preparatory requirements for university admission, it does not provide any particular group of students with a competitive advantage for university admissions based on race, ethnicity, gender, or national origin.